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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 004028

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, USPACOM FOR FPA HUSO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2015

TAGS: PREL PREF PHUM PBTS TH BM BURMA

SUBJECT: THAI MFA OFFICIAL: NO CHANGE IN POLICY TOWARD SHAN
BUT RESPONDING TO BURMESE PRESSURE

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 156

1B. CHIANG MAI 113

1C. CHIANG MAI 109

1D. RANGOON 697

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert J. Clarke, Reason: 1.4 (b)

11. (C) Summary. The Burma desk officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated that despite the Royal Thai Government's (RTG) pushback of approximately 450 Shan refugees to the Burmese side of the border last week, there is "no change in Thai policy" in providing temporary protection and humanitarian assistance to people of any ethnic origin along the Thai-Burma border. The RTG has found no evidence of reported chemical weapons use by the Burma Army against ethnic Karen fighters in February. The current overall relationship between Thailand and Burma remains strained. The MFA expects the Burmese government to announce their decision about whether or not they will assume the ASEAN chairmanship in 2006 at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Vientiane, Laos in late July. End Summary.

12. (C) In response to the reported relocation of some 450 Shan refugees the week of June 6 reported in Reftel A, Polcouns and Poloffs met with Minister Counselor Damrong Kraikruan, Burma desk officer at the Thai MFA. Damrong confirmed that this group of Shan were pushed back and said that the action was requested by the SPDC at a Thai-Burma border committee meeting earlier this year. At that meeting, Damrong reported, the SPDC had presented a list of 25 sites on the Thai side of the border where the SPDC claimed "insurgents" were being harbored. The RTG disagreed with the Burmese characterization of most of these locations and agreed to it only in connection with Doi Tai Laeng, which is located in Mae Hong Son Province, approximately 110 kilometers from the town of Mae Hong Son. According to Damrong, the complete list of "insurgent locations" provided by the SPDC included refugee camps such as Mae La and Nu Pho camps, located in Tak Province, and people who clearly did not fit into a category of "insurgent." Damrong said that the RTG rejected any relocation of established refugee camps along the border, and agreed to relocate only part of this one group of Shan and no others. In this case, Damrong said, the RTG felt it had to respond to the SPDC request, ask the Shan to relocate on the Burmese side, and inform the SPDC that the "insurgents" were on Burmese soil. He said that the RTG did not consider any of the Shan who had moved to be in any danger. Damrong claimed that the school and temple at the old site on the Thai side are still open and that all of the children, including some orphans are still on the Thai side. (Note: It is unknown by Post how many bona fide Shan orphans are among this group. Some of the children claimed as orphans could actually be children who have one or both parents still living inside Shan state or elsewhere, as in many Burmese refugee camps. End Note.)

13. (C) Damrong said that the RTG will permit the Shan (or any others) to re-enter Thailand if fighting breaks out. Damrong noted that when there was fighting between the Wa and Shan during the Songkran water festival in April this year, PM Thaksin had instructed the MFA to tell the SPDC that the RTG would allow temporary refuge and humanitarian assistance to anyone fleeing fighting. This policy is still in effect, according to Damrong. (Note: At the June monthly meeting of Burma border NGOs in Bangkok, an NGO representative noted that 896 Shan who were reportedly fleeing fighting had entered Fang District in Chiang Mai Province in May. End Note.) According to Damrong, the MFA and the office of the PM had decided not to respond publicly to criticism about the pushback of the Shan. Only the Third Army Deputy Commander, Manas Paorik was making public statements, as noted in Reftel 1A. (Note: The regional office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) generally does not engage the RTG on Shan refugees under the terms of UNHCR's 1999 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Thai government. UNHCR Regional Representative Hasin Utkan told Refco on June 7 that he had nevertheless expressed concern about the Shan pushback to the MFA. End note.)

4.(C) Damrong opined that the Wa attacked the Shan based on direct orders from the SPDC as a sort of loyalty test for the Wa following the ouster of former SPDC Prime Minister Khin

Nyunt. (Note: This analysis appears to contradict both Chiang Mai and Rangoon sources as noted in Reftels B, C and 1D. End Note.) As for the future, Damrong stated that the RTG does not/not believe more fighting will break out soon. Damrong thinks that the annual rainy season lull in fighting has started. He claimed that there are no indications of troop or weapon deployments that would indicate more fighting.

15. (C) When asked about the reported use of chemical weapons by the SPDC in February against the Karen, Damrong said that the RTG had investigated and found no evidence to substantiate the claims (Septel).

16. (C) When asked about the overall relationship between Thailand and Burma, Damrong replied that it was "not very good." He then gave a rather detailed analysis of the actions of General Maung Aye, currently Vice Chairman of the SPDC, and the General's negative perceptions of Thailand. Damrong recounted how in 1992 Maung Aye, as the Eastern Regional Commander of the Burma Army, nearly started a shooting war with the Thai Army, when troops under Maung Aye's command occupied Thai territory in Chumporn province. The Burmese Army at that time was mounting an offensive against the Karen National Liberation Army, which spilled over onto the contentious "Hill 491". Eventually, at an emergency Thai Burma border committee meeting called in Chiang Mai to resolve the dispute, Maung Aye was forced to withdraw Burmese troops and suffered a perceived loss of face.

17. (C) Damrong said that many subsequent meetings and visits scheduled between RTG officials and Maung Aye were canceled because the Burmese General would, at the last minute, refuse to meet. Maung Aye did not, in fact, visit Thailand until 10 years later, in 2002. Shortly after that visit, Thai and SPDC troops engaged in a brief border fight resulting in the shelling of Thai and Burmese Army positions and loss of life, and deepening Maung Aye's suspicions about Thailand. Lately, there has been another border dispute concerning some 36 houses on the border at Three Pagodas pass in Sangklaburi province. At a border committee meeting in March this year, the SPDC gave an ultimatum to the Thai side to remove the dwellings by the end of March or the SPDC would demolish them (16 of the houses are owned by Thais, the rest by Burmese, according to Damrong). Damrong said the negotiators spent some 10 hours working on this issue but in the end nothing happened and the villagers returned to their dwellings. Apparently, this inaction to follow up on the Burmese ultimatum had made Maung Aye furious.

18. (C) The Thai MFA expects the SPDC to announce their decision about whether or not they will assume the ASEAN chairmanship in 2006 at the ASEAN Ministerial meeting in Laos in late July. It appeared the SPDC will decline the chairmanship this round, and that a compromise plan for when and how they would be allowed to assume the chair will be worked out.

19. (C) Comment: The RTG pushback of the Shan in this one case raises concerns. Despite Thai reassurances that those relocated in Burma would be allowed to come back to Thailand in case fighting breaks out, Post will continue to inquire with MFA about the plight of the Shan, particularly the most vulnerable, such as unaccompanied minors and the disabled. While the push across the border has garnered international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, the Shan themselves have been relatively quiet about protesting the move (Reftel A). This incident may be a gesture by the RTG to appease the SPDC on a sensitive border issue while maintaining Thai humanitarian and intelligence relations with their close neighbors, the Shan. It does not appear to be the case of the Third Army taking matters into their own hands, as demonstrated by Damrong's complete knowledge and admission of the pushback. Damrong was well prepared to answer our questions. His comments about the overall relationship with Burma indicate that the MFA's recent high level of frustration with the SPDC is not abating. On the matter of the ASEAN chair, however, his assumption that the SPDC will announce at the Vientiane ASEAN Ministerial its willingness to forgo its rotation may only be wishful thinking. End Comment.

10. (U) This message was cleared by Embassy Rangoon and Consulate General Chiang Mai.
BOYCE